DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 171 094 EC 115 303

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TITLE Reading Something! Literature Instruction for Exceptional Adolescents.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual International Convention, The Council for Exceptional Children (57th, Dallas, Texas, April 22-27, 1979, Session TH-1)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; *Handicapped Children; Instruction; *Literature Programs; *Reading; Secondary Education; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Response Centered Teaching

ABSTRACT

The response-centered approach to literature instruction is ideal for teaching exceptional adolescents. In response-centered teaching the teacher stays away from dissection of the literature and focuses on the students' natural reaction to ideas, events, and values found in the work, without making judgements. Research has shown that there are four response categories: engagement/involvement, interpretation, perception, and evaluation. The approach is suited to the needs of exceptional adolescents because it creates confidence and a recognition of the similarities and differences in others. Reading aloud to the class is a useful tactic for encouraging interest. (Fifteen novels for adolescents are listed, along with brief descriptions of the story content. Highlights of a unit of instruction, including 10 activities to accompany the reading, such as making a list of adjectives describing the characters and comparing the list to that of other students, and preparing an interview between a book reviewer and the author, are given.) (PHR)

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READING SOMETHING!

Literature Instruction for Exceptional Adolescents

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paper presented to the

Council for Exceptional Children

Dallas
April, 1979

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In Ken Weber's excellent Yes, They Can! (Evanston: McDougal,Littell, 1974) Andrew--a slower-learning twelve-year old--asks his teacher, "When are we gonna' stop readin' reading and start readin' something?" That, more or less, is my question to teachers of mildly retarded or learning disabled adolescents: when will Andrew's need to acquire something from reading instruction other than reading skills be widely recognized? When will his need to find in the written word a way of thinking, a way of feeling, be acknowledged? What kind of materials and teaching strategies can give Andrew and others like him the contact with ideas and values that ought to come from good language arts and literature teaching?

But first, though, what's wrong with readin' reading? That is, given the inevitably poor reading performance of most mildly retarded teens, their need for practical and information-centered approaches to print as they enter adult life, and their well developed sense of inferiority for almost everything connected with English and language arts, why not forget the frills of the language arts curriculum and put first things first--reading skills, reading skills, and, if there's time, more reading skills? Get them up to a level of functional literacy. Make sure, if you can, that they can read and complete applications, pull significant facts out of newspapers, and find the right time for Laverne and Shirley in their TV Guide.

This philosophy is a common one among both reading specialists and English teachers I work with. In schools I visit the college prep group in Room 112 is up to its academic neck in Shakespeare and Silas Marner; but in Room 114 the low ability class, full of learning disabled, questioning Andrews, rebellious culturally different Marias, and defeated, EMR Harolds,

is taking on its own heavy reading--the latest and most skillfully marketed reading kit, and, for relevance, the local telephone directory, both white and yellow pages.

This philosophy and classroom tactics it generates are seriously flawed, however. Because of Andrew's special qualities, not in spite of them, he needs a language arts bill of fare that is more idea-centered and values-conscious than either the reading kit or the yellow pages. Let me underscore this crucial point: it is his academic exceptionality, coupled with feelings of social and psychological inadequacy, that renders a steady diet of reading basics as pointless at one extreme for Andrew as a steady diet of Elizabethan drama would be at the other. There must be--there is--something in between the desperate utility of English study in Room 114 and the "capital C-H" version of cultural heritage in Room 112 and its memorized soliloquys.

To get at this "something in between" (something quite different, in fact) let me ask you to imagine this scene in an English classroom. The teacher reads the following poem, Countee Cullen's "Incident."

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small
And he was no whit bigger
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue and called me "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there,
That's all that I remember.

Laura Jordan, the teacher, shakes her head, frowning. The students--for a rare moment or two--are silent, taking in the event.

Then Andrew breaks the quietness. "Tnat's awful. I bet that little kid coulda' killed that white kid."

"Why'd he do that, anyway? The white kid, I mean?" Kelvin asks.

"He was prejudiced," Harold answers. "He just don't like black boys."

"Maybe he was afraid, you know?" Andrew ponders this idea as he says it.

"Naw." Harold defends the prejudice hypothesis.

"I don't care why he did it," Maria contributes. "It's wrong, and it don't feel good, either. I know that. I been called names."

Joan, too big, seemingly too mature, enters the conversation. "You see that Roots on TV? This poem--this thing you read, Ms. Jordan--it makes me think of some of those things that happened on Roots."

"Like what?"

Oh, you know--people not getting along with people, hating each other. All that."

"You think it's a good poem?"

"I guess. It rhymes and all that. I like it, but it makes me sad."

"I don't like it," Andrew disagrees. "I don't like any poetry. Besides, that white kid shouldn't have called that other kid 'Nigger'."

"That's not the point," Joan says, an edge of disgust in her voice. "The guy that wrote it used that word--I don't want to say it--on purpose, to shake people up, to make you think about how that little boy felt."

The bell rings as Andrew and the others consider this last point.

Unrealistic? Perhaps. Most classes don't have discussions like this,

whether they're full of exceptional adolescents or unexceptional ones. Most classes don't read angry little poems like this one. For a multiplicity of reasons, teachers have been trained to stress other elements when they introduce a poem. Students, even unsuccessful students, have learned that they are supposed to be thinking of other matters when the teacher reads a poem. What other elements? What "other matters"? Typical teacher questions tell us. "Who is the narrator in this poem? What is the setting? The timespan? Can you find an example of assonance or alliteration in the first stanza? What is the rhyme scheme? How did the poet's background affect his ideas as expressed in the poem?"

And so on. Questions that could apply to most poems, that betray technical, scholarly-critical teaching objectives, that kill response to ideas or feelings in a poem, a story, a novel. Given this general model from their own experience as students, both in college and in high school, it is no wonder that many teachers of exceptional adolescents bypass literature altogether and concentrate on the reading-skills kit.

The past decade, though--with its concern for student-centeredness, for relevance, for values--has seen the growth of a strikingly different approach to literature instruction, an approach far more likely to generate discussions like the one above. This different approach, called response-centered teaching, should be ideal for the exceptional adolescent, whether in "mixed" classes or separate, somehow, even in the days of mainstreaming. Response-centered literature teaching is based, initially, on a relatavistic philosophy, relativism about both what is "right" in literature study and "good" in literature itself; as well, the approach is in step with percep-

tual psychology's view that each of us inevitably responds uniquely to experience; and, finally, it has been buttressed by careful research on the nature of response to literature, both among adolescents and adults.

A response-centered teacher of literature maintains that the "right answer," the hallmark of conventional literature instruction, is the last thing she's looking for. She's philosophically opposed to it. In fact, she regards the student's prior experience of playing the guess-what's-in-the-teacher's-head game, especially in an English classroom, as a big hurdle to overcome in moving toward superior, response-centered teaching. Academic literary analysis, methaphor hunts, biographical studies, literary history--these are to be avoided. And the four-pound anthology? The ivy covered mainstays of the literature curriculum--Silas Marner, The Scarlet Letter, and all the rest? Sure, they're still there, in fairly small quantities, but alongside the paperbacks, the adolescent fiction, and popular culture. In place of literary dissection, a teacher attempts to draw out of students their natural reaction to idea, event, and value found in the work of literature. And because the students are unsophisticated--at least compared to the teacher, who has usually completed the equivalent of a full major in English--their reactions are likely to be different from their teacher's. These differences are okay--good, even--and may themselves become something to study in a response-centered classroom. "Where do you think our different ideas about this poem come from, anyway?" Laura Jordan might ask.

From a perceptual psychology point of view, the response-centered approach to literature concedes two critical points: first, that discovery

of the "real meaning" of a literary work, like that of any other message, is literally impossible; second, that the feelings and ideas of young people in responding to literature will vary from one to the next, and contrast sharply, sometimes, with an adult's response. A response-centered teacher, rather than fighting these truths, joins them.

Research since the sixties (Squire, 1964; Purves, 1968) has added greatly to our knowledge of what happens when literary work and the mind of a reader meet. Squire classified the recorded oral responses of high school students reading short stories as literary judgment, interpretational responses, narrational responses, and others with the types named here as most common. Purves, whose subjects wrote responses to literature following reading, identified four major (and inclusive) types of response: one, engagement-involvement (in which the reader, figuratively, puts himself into the story, identifying with character and event, or likens elements in the literary work to events in his own life); two, interpretation (in which the reader infers meaning—character motives and traits, for example); three, perception (in which reader reveals his awareness that the work is the product of craft); and four, evaluation (in which reader defines the "goodness" of a literary work, either aesthetic or moral).

Purves' response categories have become the basis of response-centered teaching strategies. They are described fully and readably in his How Porcupines Make Love (Lexington, Mass.: Xerox, 1972) and are not as complicated as they sound initially. Recall the discussion of the Countee Cullen poem? In Andrew's, Joan's, and the other students' comments are each of the four response modes Purves identified, as indicated below:

engagement-involvement (reader engages with ideas, events, in text

or relates them to personal experience):

"That's awful. I bet that little kid coulda' killed that white kid." "I don't care why he did it. It's wrong, and it don't feel good either. I know that. I been called names." "You see that Roots on TV? . . . it makes me think of some of those things that happened on Roots." "Besides, that white kid shouldn't have called that other kid 'Nigger'."

interpretation (reader assigns meaning to text or elements within it):

"Why'd he do that, anyway? The white kid, I mean?" "He was prejudiced He just don't like black boys." "Maybe he was afraid, you know?" "Naw."

perception (reader indicates awareness of work as something made by another human being; reader attends to matters of form and style):

"It rhymes and all that." "The guy that wrote it used that word . . . on purpose, to shake people up, to make you think about how that little boy felt."

evaluation (reader indicates how he rates the work in terms of good-bad, right-wrong, etc.):

"I guess it's a good poem." "I like it." "I don't like it. I don't like any poetry."

Get the idea? Purves conceives of these four response categories, exemplified in Andrew's, Kelvin's and the other kids' lively interchange, as a sort of reservoir of potential responses from which a reader may draw as it suits his purposes or needs. The overt response behavior may be written (as with Purves' actual study), oral (the discussion in Laura Jordan's English class), or in some other form such as a learning activity. Consider,

for example, the following:

response category	statement	activity
engagement-involvement	"I bet that little kid coulda' killed that white kid."	students stage name-calling incidents, then questions "victims"
interpretation	"Maybe he was afraid, you know?" "Naw."	interview role-playing students re feelings toward event
perception	"The guy that wrote it used that word . . . on purpose."	list other possible words that could have been used
evaluation	"I don't like it. I don't like any poetry."	write a fourth verse that would be more appealing

For every comment a student might make, there is a potential learning activity--some complex, some simple, some serious, others silly, and so on.

The same is true of teacher questions. In the discussion of "Incident," Laura Jordan speaks only twice, asking questions that steer a student toward clarifying or amplifying another statement. She asks Joan to expand on the connection between the poem and Roots, and--more directly-- asks her if she thinks the poem is "good." Her questions may be non-directive or intended to elicit specific types of response such as engagement-involvement or evaluation. In either case, though, she seeks to help her students do "what comes naturally" while avoiding heavy-handed teaching of her own ideas.

The connection between response-centered teaching and the reading needs of exceptional adolescents is almost too obvious to express here, but I must, for emphasis. Response-centered literature instruction focuses on what is happening in the reader, his ideas and feelings, and makes it public in a supportive, reinforcing manner. Andrew and the others, who

need to break out of school-imposed and self-imposed reading cages, can grow in their reading confidence in such a setting, even when more academically successful students are sitting across the aisle. Given such confidence, a feeling of readin' something as opposed to just readin' reading, they can take a first step toward reading independence. And those skills? No, I'm not naive enough to suggest that they'll just take care of themselves, but they will have a better chance of sticking with Andrew when he perceives that they're for something he needs at a basic human level.

Purves' general goals for response-centered literature teaching (How Porcupines Make Love, p. 31) underscore the approach's suitability for the mildly retarded or learning disabled adolescent.

- An individual will feel secure in his response . . . and not be dependent on someone else's response. An individual will trust himself.
- An individual will know why he responds the way he does to a poem--what in him causes the response and what in the poem causes the response. He will get to know himself.
- An individual will respect the responses of others as being as valid for them as his is for him. He will recognize his differences from other people.
- An individual will recognize that there are common elements in people's responses. He will recognize his similarity with other people.

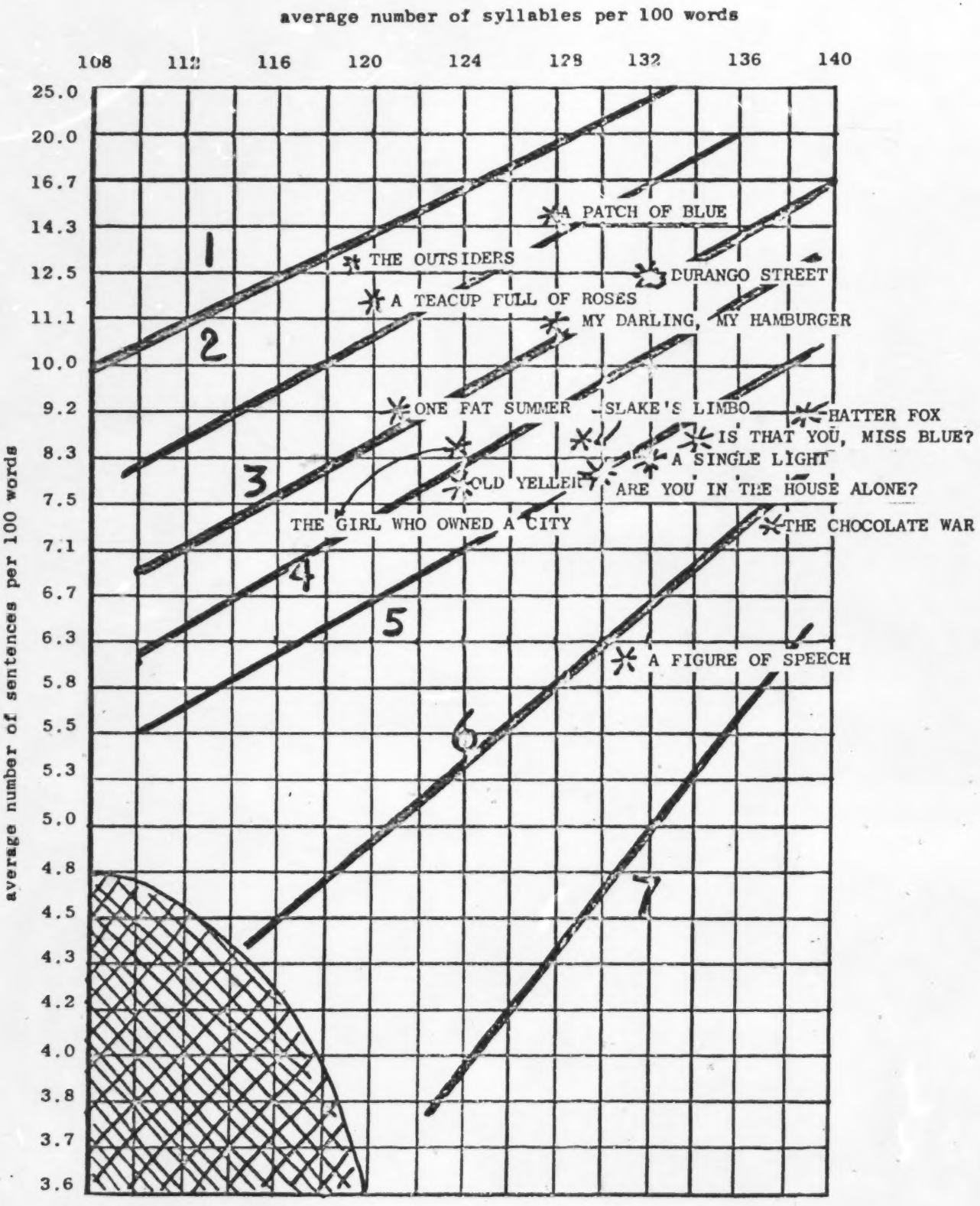
Self-trust, self-knowledge, a grasp of differences and similarities with others--yes, these are admirable somethings that young people ought to get

from their education, somewhere, somehow. Superior response-based experience with literature, too long absent from the handicapped young person's curriculum, can provide both a where and a how.

Twelve-line poems like "Incident," though, are not enough to build an entire literature program around. I've used it here as an example of the response-centered approach. I believe that adolescents can and should read book-length works--novels. Time spent in classroom reading and responding to longer works will pay rich dividends. With careful selection practices that take into account both reading difficulty and adolescent interests, superior works for common reading may be identified. Common reading, in which the full class reads and responds to the same novel, can be especially rewarding for slower learners. They can and will accomplish together, socially, collaboratively what is unrewarding--even impossible--when attempted alone.

On the next page, fifteen superior novels for exceptional adolescents are identified by reading difficulty, ranging from three at the second-grade level to two at the sixth. Not one of them is demeaning or "special"; several are all-time best sellers among adolescents; a couple--and I won't tell you which--are among my own favorite books.

In terms of character age, content, or other narrative elements, these titles may be grouped for general suitability for junior-high and senior-high audiences. My preliminary caution is that you take my grouping only half seriously. The exceptions may be numerous.



FIFTEEN SUPERIOR NOVELS FOR EXCEPTIONAL ADOLESCENTS, ARRANGED BY DIFFICULTY (USING FRY'S GRAPH FOR ESTIMATING READABILITY)
(large numbers on graph indicate approximate grade-level difficulty)

Titles for junior high school exceptional adolescents, arranged from

"very easy" to "easy":

S.E. Hinton, The Outsiders. Dell. (2nd grade level) A near classic of adolescent fiction, this novel follows the conflict between Ponyboy Curtis, from the hoody section of town, and the "Socs"--an "in" group of middle-class college-prep types. Honest and positive statement about young people.

Sharon Bell Mathis, A Teacup Full of Roses. (2nd grade level) Avon. (See following pages for more on this novel.)

Frank Bonham, Durango Street. (3-4 grade level) Dell. Rufus Henry, fresh out of reform school and anxious to go straight, finds the pressure to join a street gang all but overwhelming. Through a social worker, Rufus may find a way out.

O. T. Nelson, The Girl Who Owned a City. (3-4 grade level) Dell. Based on a pretty implausible sci-fi premise (all adults have been killed by a plague), this novel is saved by the clever "what-would-happer-if" situation that follows ten-year old Lisa as she attempts to bring order to a world without grown-ups. Lisa and friends are believable. Nelson's perceptions of child capabilities are positive.

Felice Holman, Slake's Limbo. (4th grade level) Dell. A fascinating account of how Aremis Slake, a thirteen-year old child of the streets, lives for four months in the underground tunnels of a subway. A convincing study of survival, both physical and psychological.

Gipson, Old Yeller. (4th grade level) Harper Row Perennial. Well-known novel of how fourteen-year old Travis and his family survive frontier life while his father is absent on a cattle drive. Travis and his dog, Old Yeller, face many perils.

Titles for senior high school exceptional adolescents, arranged from "very easy"

to "easy":

Elizabeth Kata, A Patch of Blue. (2-3 grade level) Popular Library. Selena, blind and deprived, meets Gordon, black and concerned about his new friend. A sometimes terrifying, often poignant novel of prejudice, love, and hope.

Paul Zindel, My Darling, My Hamburger. (3-4 grade level) Bantam. High School is the setting for this often amusing, realistic story of identity problems, unwanted pregnancies, and conflicts between youth and adult value systems. Very popular for a decade.

Robert Lipsyte, One Fat Summer. Bantam. (3-4 grade level) Bobby Marks deals with his biggest problems one summer--his obesity, and more important, his feelings about himself. Strong conflict and suspense centers on ill will between the lake's summer crowd and the locals. Believable.

Marilyn Harris, Hatter Fox. (5-6 grade level) Bantam. Hard-hitting--ocassionally shocking--story of an Indian girl trying to retain her sanity while fitting into society's contemporary expectations. Sympathetic and credible portraits of Hatter and those who befriend her.

M.E. Kerr, Is That You, Miss Blue? Dell. (5-6 grade level) The boarding-school scene is the unlikely setting for this novel in which Flanders Brown takes a giant step toward maturity by coming to see her parents, her teachers, and herself in a more realistic light. As always with M.E. Kerr, humor and quiet insight go hand in hand.

Maia Wojciechowska, A Single Light. Bantam. (5-6 grade level) A deaf mute girl steals a small statue of the Christ child. Through it, she seeks love and the sense of being needed. A poignant tale of man's inhumanity toward those who are different, with a message of hope.

Richard Peck, Are You in the House Alone? Dell. (5-6 grade level) Following a series of threats, Alison is raped while baby sitting. When it turns out that the town's leading family's elder son is the rapist, the plot thickens. This is a realistic but tasteful treatment of a problem which concerns many adolescent girls.

Robert Cormier, The Chocolate War. Dell. (6th grade level) Jerry tries to defy the group by refusing to participate in the annual candy sale fund raiser for his school. Where this seems to be a silly premise to begin with, Cormier gives his characters both plausibility and ominousness, and the novel turns out to be a convincing study of group loyalties, individuality, and violence.

Norma Fox Mazer, A Figure of Speech. Dell. (6th grade level) Jenny and her grandfather, Grandpa, are very close, but he is being pushed aside by his family because of his age. He's "in the way" of a married son's need to claim the basement for an apartment with his new wife. Jenny and Grandpa rebel. An honest look at the problem of aging family members and their special relation with young people.

Let me introduce another cautionary note. If you haven't read any fiction for adolescents since your own high school days, be prepared for some surprises in these books. They're realistic. They deal with real events--some ugly, some not. In them, adolescents talk like adolescents; adults have both adult faults and adult redeeming qualities. Happy endings are not inevitable. Didacticism, when present, is more subtle than in works written, say, before 1965.

Today's secondary school student profits considerably from individualized programs, I think, but can benefit from common learning experience as well. Classes

including exceptional adolescents, mentally retarded or learning disabled, ought to study two novels or comparable works in a school year, devoting between one and two weeks to the unit. I agree with Ken Weber (Yes, They Can, p. 149) that getting them into the work is the biggest challenge, and that reading to them, perhaps as much as a third of the novel, is a sound tactic to get over this initial hurdle. Most of today's adolescents enjoy being read to, whether they are academically talented or habitually unsuccesful students. At several points in the early reading of a novel in class, a teacher should stop in order to let students share their free responses to the people and events as they are revealed. Discussions may be loosely structured, like what Laura Jordan did in presenting the Cullen poem. Comprehension questions from the teacher may be necessary but are posed only when it is clear that students need some basic help with what has happened. At appropriate times, students have ample opportunity for individual reading. Then, as students finish the novel, the teacher introduces specific response-centered activities that allow students to express more fully their perceptions of the work.

Highlights of a unit on A Teacup Full of Roses, by Sharon Bell Mathis, illustrate the possibilities. The unit is for 11th and 12th grade slow learners.

Mathis' novel follows the story of Joe Brooks and his family as they face the return of an addict brother home from rehabilitation. Paul, the addicted but talented brother, is soon back on drugs and steals money being saved for Davey, a third brother, who is soon to enter college. Joe, once a gang leader, now returns to the street-gang skills he wants to leave behind him; in an attempt to recover the stolen money from a pusher, a fight develops and Davey is killed. Joe, who has graduated from night school after several years as a dropout, enters

the navy intent on making something more of himself as a kind of memorial to his dead brother. Other significant characters are Ellie, Joe's girl; Mattie and Isaac, the parents; and Warwick, the pusher.

The unit might begin with a minimal-situation role-play activity, like the one following, that introduces the basic conflict of the plot and encourages engagement-involvement responses from the students.

> Role-Play for Two Students: You are brothers. One has just returned from a drug rehabilitation center; he is afraid that he really isn't cured. This is hard or impossible for him to admit. The second brother wants to give the first greater confidence, to let him know that he can make it. Play the scene.

Other activities--those to accompany or follow the reading of the novel--follow. These span the four response categories and range in academic challenge from easy to difficult. Preferably, students will be able to choose from three, four, or more learning activities a teacher identifies as suitable.

1. As you read, use your list of character adjectives to list a few words that describe the people in A Teacup Full of Roses--Paul, Joe, Davey, the parents, Ellie, and Warwick. Compare the words you choose with those listed by other students. (I recommend use of a list of about 100 adjectives for this and other response activities.)
2. Pretend you are Ellie and have been keeping a diary during the week in which the story takes place. Write four or five entries you think she might have written.

3. Prepare a court scene for the trial of Davey's killer. Use the following as witnesses: Joe, the two parents, Warwick, and Ellie.
4. Find a poem that you believe is like the way Joe felt at the end of the story. Cut out pictures from magazines that go along with his mood and the poem.
5. Make up a skit with your group that shows what might happen when Joe comes home after a year in the navy.
6. Joe is the only character whose thoughts are included in the story. Write (or tape) the thoughts of the characters below:

   Mattie at the hospital
   Davey at Joe's graduation
   Warwick after he has gotten money from Paul
   Paul after he takes Joe's Money
   Ellie after Joe leaves for the navy

7. Read A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich or excerpts from Manchild in the Promised Land. Tell others how these books compare with A Teacup Full of Roses. (This is not an activity for poor readers; perhaps the teacher should read aloud selections from these works, as time permits.)
8. Write an epitaph for Davey.
9. Assume that a TV series will be made from A Teacup Full of Roses. Outline what you think would be a good story for the second show in the series. Suggest actors who could play the main parts.
10. Prepare an interview between a book reviewer and Sharon Bell Mathis. Make up a few main questions you think would be asked. Get help from your teacher if you need it.

Activities such as these are student-centered, intellectually sound, and likely to be completed sucessfully. An abler student will go beyond what

a poor student can accomplish, but each takes part in the same basic type of response activity. Each does it "right," for there are limitless correct ways to participate. Evaluation and grading? These are to be based on measures of what students actually do, within their limitations. Test are avoided since their negative qualities outweigh a teacher's need for "objective" numbers in her book. General reinforcement is provided both through a general atmosphere of trust and acceptance of student ideas and accomplishments, and specified repeated opportunity to share response products such as scripts or collages.

Readin' something? Yes, Andrew and other exceptional adolescents need rich literary experience of the kind described here. And, yes, they can have it, through the response-centered approach. To provide them less is to deny both their educability and humanity.

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